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Grant Comes East: A Novel of the Civil War

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Review

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Gingrich, Newt and Forstchen, William R. *Grant Comes East: A Novel of the Civil War*. Thomas Dunne Books, \$24.95 ISBN 312309376

Alternative account

Authors produce their second what-if story

What if the South had won the Battle of Gettysburg? This is the question addressed in Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen's **Grant Comes East**, the follow-up to their imaginatively entitled *Gettysburg*, in which Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia did indeed outmaneuver and defeat the Army of the Potomac at their critical clash in July of 1863.

The backgrounds of both authors render them well-suited to speculating as to the military strategy and political wrangling that may have followed such a turn of events. In addition to being a former Speaker of the House, Gingrich holds a Ph.D. in history, is a visiting professor at the National Defense University, and serves as a member of Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board. Forstchen, the more experienced author with over 30 previous books, is an associate professor of history at Montreat College.

The novel opens with Ulysses S. Grant, the new commander of all Union troops, in the midst of the logistical nightmare of moving his western army across the nation and supplying it in timely enough fashion to face Lee. In Washington, D.C., Abraham Lincoln defiantly refuses to abandon the city or to even allow his family to leave, knowing full-well that to do so would send a message of weakness to the nervous North. The other major Union player is General Dan Sickles, who brutally quells the New York draft riots before reconstituting the scattered Army of the Potomac.

As for the Confederates, the authors focus primarily upon Lee. Having defeated the northern troops at Union Mills, Maryland, Lee has a clear shot at the

heavily fortified capital. Even though he is fully aware of the risks involved with such an assault, the prospect of capturing Lincoln and ending the war or at least taking the city and possibly convincing Britain or France to join with their cause is too much for Lee to resist. After being repulsed, Lee turns his attention to Baltimore, a much easier target, and prepares to take the fight to Grant and Sickles rather than wait to be trapped between the two armies.

Gingrich and Forstchen's strength lies in the plotting of the military strategy and political maneuvering. They describe General Herman Haupt's orchestration of Grant's troop movement and the gathering of supplies in fascinating detail. Equally interesting is Sickles's conniving with Boss Tweed to get command of the Army of the Potomac and his hopes to ride victory into the White House. They demonstrate Lee's military genius in drawing Sickles into battle before his troops are ready. And they leave the reader with a nice strategic twist on Grant's part.

As interesting as all of this is, the authors fail to do one thing that is key to the success of any novel: breathe life into their characters. Instead of making these characters that really lived seem like real people, Gingrich and Forstchen present them as caricatures. The saintly Lincoln holds a dying Confederate soldier in his arms and, later, eats a meal with a black White House servant as they discuss history and prospects for the future. The pious, genteel Lee prays before sending his men to battle and seeks to avoid political entanglements. Grant grimly chomps his cigars and expends minimal effort in staying on the wagon.

Nor are the authors interested in the plight of the common soldier. Even the battle scenes, where a down-in-the-trenches point of view would have been more enthralling, are told from the perspective of the officers. The thoughts of an infantryman, stealthily advancing on Fort Stephens, hoping to remain hidden in darkness for as long as possible would have been much more gripping than those of a sergeant-major in the second wave. Or what of the thoughts of a private when Sickles gives the order to fire on New Yorkers as traitors?

The actual writing to be found in **Grant Comes East** gets the job done, but no one will be tempted to quote passages as examples of great prose. The authors could have also used a fact checker. For example, Hannibal Hamlin, rather than James Blaine, served as Lincoln's first vice president. Additionally, Robert Gould Shaw's black troops of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment should not be referred to as veterans before their assault on Fort Wagner, which the events of

this novel and its predecessor renders unlikely to have taken place at all.

Despite some flaws, Gingrich and Forstchen have produced a very readable entry into the literature of speculative history. It will be interesting, perhaps even thrilling, to see how the military strategy and political maneuvering plays out in the next installment. However, **Grant Comes East** is not for those who desire a deeper look into the psyches of history's giants, which the best historical fiction often provides.

Thomas Hill received an M.A. in history from Oklahoma State University and is currently working toward an M.F.A. in writing at the University of Memphis where he also teaches. He can be reached at thill70@yahoo.com.